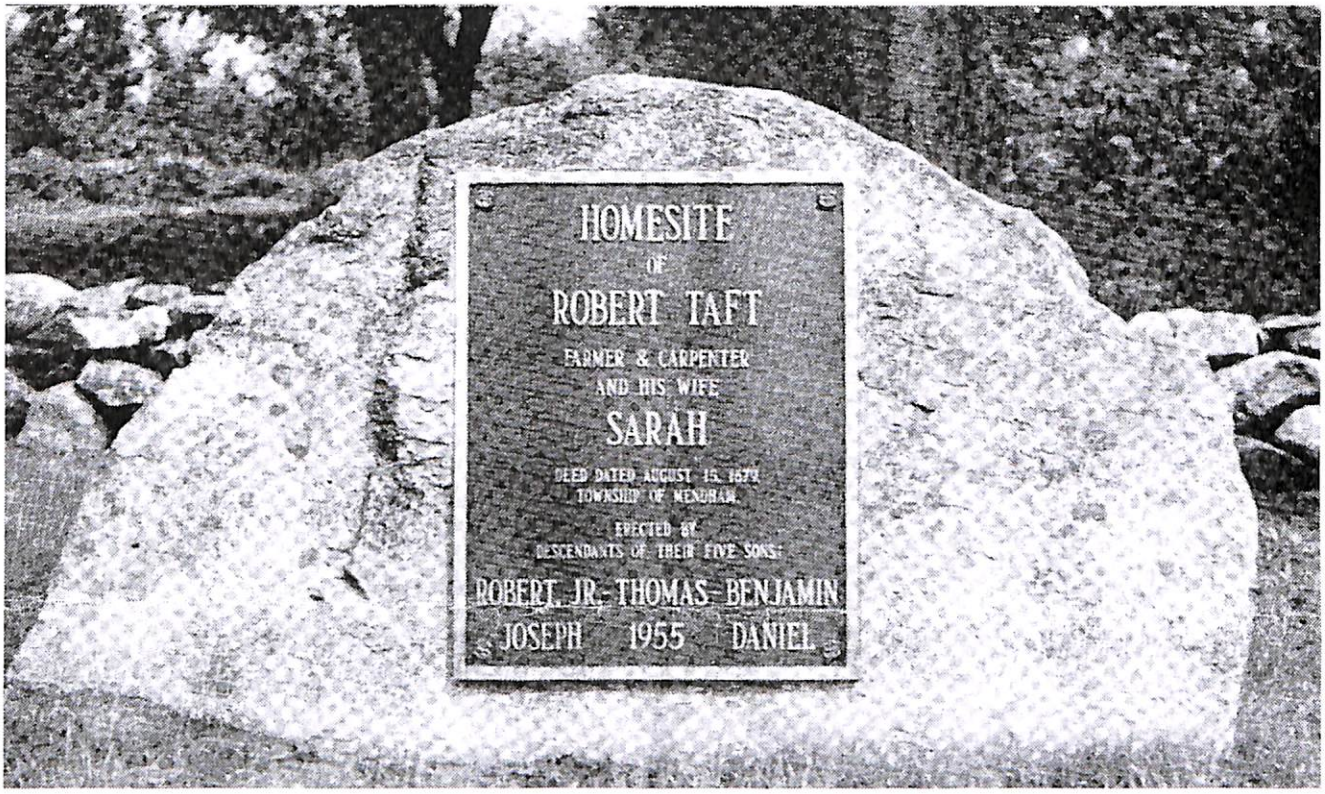
TAFT TALK

No. 79 *Newsletter of the Taft Family Association* Dec 2020



Our Homestead and Forebears Endure

On 20 Aug 1955 The Taft Family Association with 305 attendees were scheduled to attend the dedication of the Taft Memorial Stone and Plaque at Lake Nipmuc Park in Mendon. Unfortunately an "uninvited guest - Hurricane Diane" arrived. There was quite a bit of uncertainty whether the reunion would proceed since weather was miserable and the ability to cross the bridge uncertain. For a couple hours it appeared there might be two locations: one in Mendon and the other in Uxbridge. Tafts however prevailed and held the event at the Uxbridge High School.

Our Taft Memorial Stone and plaque commemorates the approximate location of the Robert and Sarah Taft Homestead and is found on Millville St. in Mendon, MA. The monument was placed on about ½ acre of land donated to the Taft Family Association by Carlton and Millie (Taft) Goss in 1955.

In the early spring of this year, the Association received a document from the Mendon Town Assessors indicating the site and its value and asking whether it should be continued in its present non-profit status. This came as quite a surprise to your editor. Apparently their office discovered nothing had been sent to the TFA for many years and had gone unnoticed. To be honest it should have occurred to me that the stone and plaque must sit on a piece of property owned by somebody. Because we are in the process of disbanding our Association, the timing was actually fortuitous – another year later and who knows how it would have been settled.

See Taft Memorial Plaque cont. p 4

From the Board of the Taft Family Association

Unfortunately we have reached the time when we must say farewell to the Taft Tree Talk and the Taft Family Association, as we know it today. Over the 146 years since the first TFA Reunion on 12 Aug 1874 with its famous talk by Judge Alphonso Taft, the Association has presented a unique bond - that family connection and a home for all those who are descended from Robert Taft. The impetus and the strength of our family group started in Mendon and Uxbridge and continued for many years with annual reunions and lovely luncheons. Most of those who were involved at the onset were close relatives, intimately knowledgeable about each other, often living no more than 20 miles apart. As time has proceeded, the geographical extensions of the family have reached as far as Canada and Australia and the family now encompasses 12 generations, and counting.

At one time in the 1980s, we were over 600 strong and reunions might include more than 200 celebrants – that's a lot of cousins in one place! Now even with new members, attrition has taken its toll and we find ourselves with fewer than 100 members today. Most of our members have celebrated ¾ of a century or more. Although we will no longer have a newsletter, we are in the process of ensuring that the work and passion we have poured into the TFA will not be forgotten. In this, our final, newsletter we will spotlight the various entities and tasks that are ongoing.

The Board of Directors

We have always been fortunate to find dedicated and thoughtful people to lead our organization. While our numbers have shrunk and our board has done the same, in recent years we have been ably led by two stalwart board members - Sally Gagne and Charles F. Davis. Behind the scenes and over the online waves, so to speak, they have added sage advice on various topics, no more significant than now as we grapple with closure. Both of these folks have provided exceedingly helpful, thoughtful and supportive voices, to which I am eternally grateful. It seems only fitting that you should meet the people who have held the TFA together:

Sally Gagné: of Silver Spring, MD, joined the Board when new members were sought in 2009. She is a naturalist interested in the preservation of nearly everything from native plants to Taft history. Especially satisfying to Sally is seeing names and dates used to gather unexpected records, building an entire history, from facts that are "out there" waiting to be retrieved. From your editor's viewpoint Sally has frequently asked very deep and penetrating questions on a variety of issues.

In 1994 Sally Gagne was one of two TFA Reunion speakers along with David Lambert. She spoke on her project entitled *Five Generations of an American Family*, which included working with 300 family letters written between 1780 and 1980. The story followed Moses Fish (1759-1835) from Groton, CT to Leyden, MA and then to Rome, NY and then continued with his son Jesse who married Mercy Taft, then their daughter Delia and her daughter Helen who was the mother of Sally's father. Sally's family is in the Benjamin line.

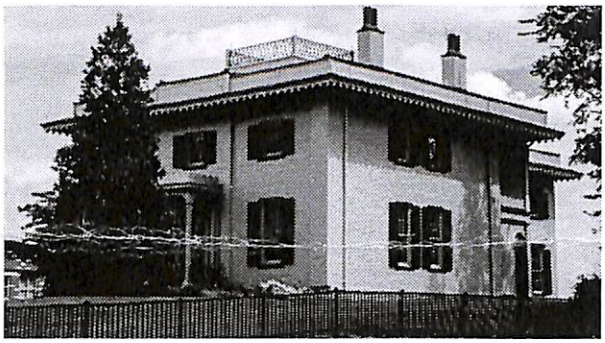
Charles F. Davis: of Concord, MA joined the Board in 1997. Over the years he has shared extensive information particularly on the Follansbee family (TTT 65 p 2). Charles has been a steadying and reassuring influence on your editor many times over the years.

Charles grew up in the Chicago area. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1944 and served in stateside duty through WW II. After forty years of reserve duty he retired as Captain. Charles earned a BS in Chemical Engineering and an MS in Chemistry before going to MIT for his PhD in Physics. He has been quite active in Freemasonry as well as tending the family homestead and apple orchard in Concord, MA.

Sadly, Charles' wife Patricia "Pat" (Libbey) Davis died recently and her *In Memoriam* will be found on p 7.

Mendon Historical Society
Located at 15 Hastings St., Mendon, MA.
Hours are Tuesday from 11:00 am to 3:00 pm and Sunday noon to 4:00 pm.

New England Historic Genealogical Society
Located at 101 Newbury St., Boston, MA
Hours are Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday 9 am -5 pm, and Wednesday 9- 9.



William Howard Taft National Historic Site
Located at 2038 Auburn Ave., Cincinnati, OH
Hours are daily from 8:30 am to 4:45 pm

The Future Homes of Our 146 years of collected knowledge

Over the last few years, your editor has been organizing the various databases we have on the Taft family. It is quite clear that we do not want to lose the information we have gathered over the last 146 years. While each newsletter has been sent to about 50-60 organizations, we still have much research that remains in one place .... on my computer. These databases include, but are not limited to, the TTT with its every name index, lists of Revolutionary War and Civil War soldiers, photos of Taft family members (often used in the newsletters), as well as the current descendancy information on all Tafts from Robert and Sarah Taft forward. There are a few books that will go to the Mendon Historical Society as well.

The Board has determined that we should make a few complete sets of our accumulated wisdom and send them for safe keeping and posterity to the following repositories:

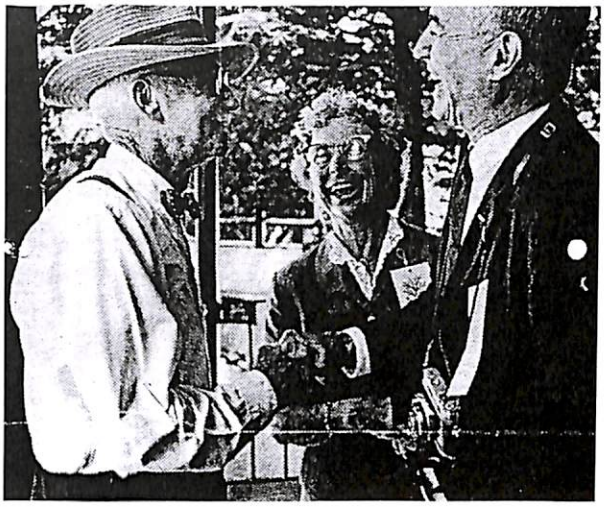
1. Mendon Historical Society
2. New England Historic and Genealogical Society (where Neil Todd worked, the home of the 1910 MSS by Lt. Gov. Russell Smith Taft and his son Russell Wales Taft, and world-renowned as the most important source for New England ancestry.
3. The William Howard Taft Homestead in Cincinnati, OH which recently, through the efforts of Seth Frost, is broadening its holdings on the entire Taft family.

We will also place descendancy files online so as many people as possible can access this information as well.

Taft Memorial Plaque *cont from p 1*

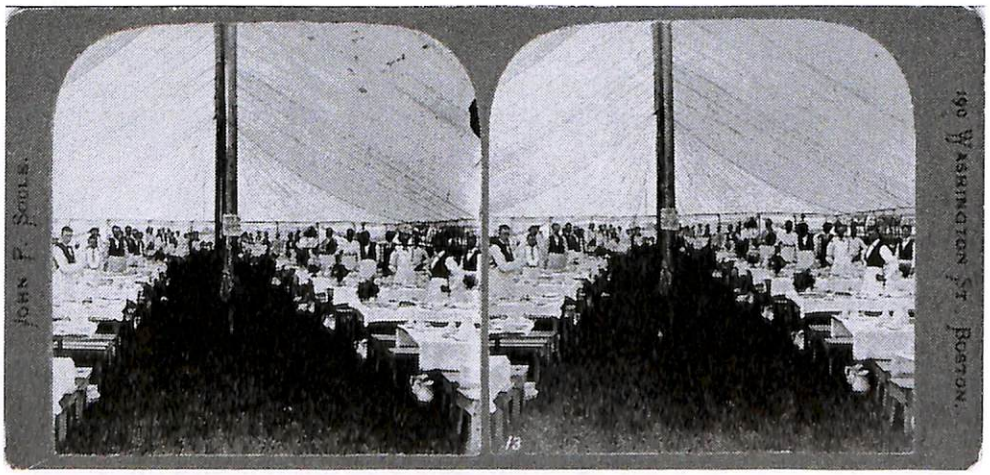
Enlisting the help of long-time member David Lowell who lives in Mendon and serendipitously lives right next door to the monument, I discovered that his wife, Jane Lowell, was actually THE person I needed. Jane also happens to be the current President of the Mendon Historical Society, and is well-versed in planning matters as well as the history of the town and their own land.

At this point with the invaluable assistance and direction of Jane, we are well on the way to transferring ownership of our property to the Mendon Historical Society. Further research disclosed that there never was a deed for this parcel to the TFA; however, all subsequent documents for abutting parcels include specific reference to this ½ acre piece being a separate entity and not owned by anyone else. No wonder it disappeared from view! That however isn't quite what we need to close this out. Going through our Taft records has also produced similar not-quite-conclusive-or-legal results. In the 1950s there are several articles and photos showing the stone and TFA officers in front of the stone, but alas no minutes or documents that would be legally binding have been found. Enter Rich Schofield who has taken on the task of finding members of the extended Taft-Goss family, since Carlton and Millie did not have children, in order to get quit claim deeds. I was able to give him charts to begin the search as well as find some addresses, but unfortunately, none of those folks are or have been members of the TFA. Having said that, he believes he can do "due diligence" and come up with an appropriate deed for us. The intention is to have the Mendon Historical Society (MHS) own and maintain this property. In addition the TFA board has agreed that monies in our treasury should go to the MHS to ensure proper care is given to the monument and to further research on the Taft family in Mendon / Uxbridge. After all without Tafts there would not have been much of a Mendon or Uxbridge!



Robert Taft (ae 87) with Charles P. and Eleanor Taft at 1960 Reunion

Carlton Goss and Reed A Benson with Taft Family Tree



Stereoptic view of 1874 Reunion tent

Former Mayor Charles P. Taft at 1960 Reunion

The Tafts hold a reunion

One of America's distinguished families pays homage to its founder, a sturdy farmer

In 1670, a hardy, courageous farmer named Robert Taft and his wife Sarah ignored the threat of hostile Indians and settled, with their five sons, in Mendon, Mass. The family, originally English, sought the good, free life in a new land where a man had the chance to be anything he chose. The Tafts survived and prospered, and recently some 260 of their descendants from many parts of the United States gathered in Mendon to honor Farmer Taft. A will to succeed and a love of their country have continued to make those who followed after him one of America's most distinguished and most respected families.

The first Taft reunion was held in 1874. They are now held every five years in Mendon, Mass.

Time Magazine wrote an extensive article on the 1960 Taft Reunion

Dick Messinger, left, President and editor for more than 20 years

Neil Todd, right, Vice President and Historian for more than 20 years

Berneta DeVries, Secretary-Treasurer supreme!

1955 Reunion behind-the-scenes committee, below

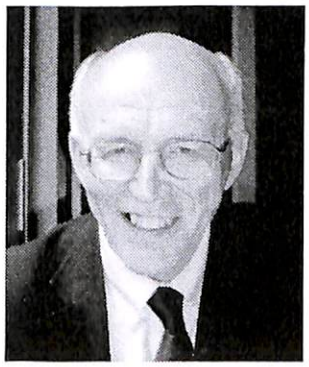
Online work and people

In order to give as many people as possible access to our information we will put our data on ancestry.com in an abbreviated format: vital records and lineage and perhaps brief biographies of people. Ancestry.com does not divulge names of people who are still alive, so any of that information that we have will not be available to the public.

Efforts are currently underway to make this database as accurate and complete as possible. The first task is to accumulate all the data we can find on each person including vital records, probates, grave sites, war service, census and social security data. We have four generations ready for the second task. The second task will be to go through the individuals again and consolidate the information into brief but thorough and readable formats. Then it will be time to disseminate this work online and to the repositories. Between the repositories and the online database, we should be able to ensure that this information is not lost.

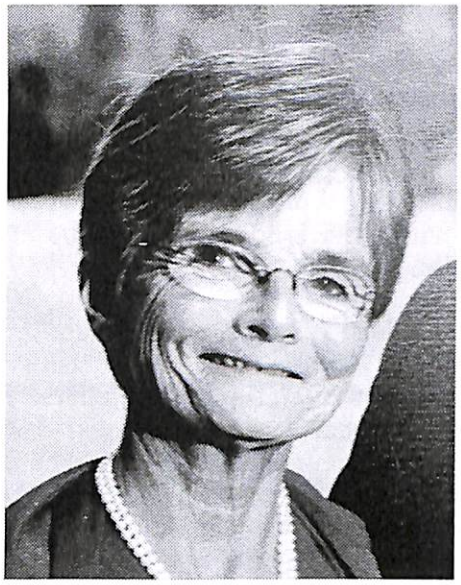
Who are the people involved in this work? Joining me in this endeavor are two members who came forward when the request was sent out.

Robert Grossman: added much information to Neil Todd's database for Frank Henry Taft. He is in the Benjamin line.



Edwin G. Taft

Edwin G. Taft: Graduated from Hamilton College and Albany Medical College. He served in the US Army Medical Corps and practiced at Albany Medical Center as well as in private practice specializing in Hematology. He has been President of several medically related associations and authored scientific papers and chapters in his field. His other interests include competing in track and field events in the Masters and Seniors divisions. Ed is in the Robert line.



A Tribute: Pat Allen

Sally Gagné, Board Member of the TFA, interviewed Pat Allen for this article:

If Robert Taft reads this Newsletter from his Yarmouthport, MA grave he will rise to applaud Pat Allen. She is Robert's 8th generation descendant who has held together our organization over the last eighteen years.

Pat comes from West Hartford, CT, with a quarter of her ancestry "old New England." This includes three of Robert Taft's five sons, Robert Taft, Joseph Taft and Benjamin Taft. (Her remaining ancestry is Irish, German and Welsh.) Pat has known all this from a young age when her grandmother, Marguerite Webster Taft, who was a member of the DAR, spoke of it often.

At the University of Minnesota Pat majored not in history, but architecture, after which she began to design houses.

Pat's husband Mark is of "old New England" ancestry as well, and of course, once married, the question soon arose whether Mark too had Taft blood. Moving to Michigan for three years, Pat set design and building aside and began looking up Mark's ancestry. Indeed Mark is descended from a Taft - but Nicholas Taft. Some people cite Nicholas as the father of Robert; however based on dates that is highly unlikely, Robert Taft more likely born about 1640. Whether or not there is a close relationship will require a DNA study some day.

Using the start of a genealogy done by Mark's father, a geneticist, on his family, Pat became hooked. Her husband, a retired physician, joined a Family Practice Program in Greenfield, MA. There Pat and Mark raised two sons. When Pat could find time she did extensive research on Mark's family lines. At the same time, she began work on her own New England ancestry. When her children were grown she made journeys to the New England Historic and Genealogical Society in Boston where she discovered references to the Taft Family Association. That led to attending Taft Reunions in Mendon. Her enthusiasm was evident and welcome, and she became Vice-president. Pat then took on weekly visits to the Worcester Co. Deed Office to transcribe Taft deeds from the microfiche and send them on to Neil Todd. One of those deeds led to the "discovery" of two daughters of Benjamin which he wrote about in TTT No. 30 (1996).

Pat has worked in recent years with all five brother descendancy lines, and so is in a position to see generalizations, some of which follow:

Names - There are some antiquated "crazy" old Taft names taken from the Bible - and here we are in an age of creating more unusual names and unique spellings. Not to be outdone, Pat says, there is always Pansy Blossom Taft.

Family Size - Taft families were larger in the first seven generations, then started to decrease in size, part of a wide trend in America.

Inventories - Lists of household and barnyard goods - chattels - were often made at death to lay out what should be sold. In studying inventories it can be entertaining to see when objects such as an "umbrella" or "hearing horn" were first listed, and to look up what objects like firkins were once needed for. Lists included items as large as acres of land, down to combs worth pennies or pence. Until about 1780 to 1800 inventories were listed in pounds, shillings and pence; It took time for states to shift to dollars and cents. Pat has even found records in which both currencies were listed.

Land - Early generations of Tafts were mainly farmers, and thus their worth was in their land (known as land-poor). At death the land was usually divided, first with the widow receiving her dower rights or thirds, then the eldest son a double share of the remainder, and the other children or their heirs each receiving a single share. Of course daughters often received only a token, as they had already received their portions at marriage.

See Tribute for cont. p 7

Tribute cont from p 6

And then occasionally a child would be left something "if he comes to claim it." Division of the real estate also included dividing the house, usually to the widow and either unmarried daughters or eldest sons. These agonizing details of division can be quite amusing, such as half a barn floor being given for threshing, or privileges designated for passing and re-passing to the well or through doors and stairs to get from one part of the house to another. Apparently it kept the peace to have it all so minutely spelled out.

Insolvency – Because the Tafts often had land but not much else, their estates might be unable to pay the charges against them, thus bringing the family to insolvency. If goods were insufficient to pay debts, land was sold as needed. The courts tended to ensure some monies were left for the widow to live on, and often creditors received pennies to the dollar.

Family Caring - In all communities someone had to care for orphaned children or for destitute families, and Tafts clearly cared for their own. Court records show that the number of Tafts who were guardians or administrators for other Tafts was quite extensive.

As we end the 146th year of our Association, whose members are bound together by the genes of a single ancestor, will Pat have nothing to do? Presently she is preparing to transfer genealogical records to a website where they should be available to anyone "for centuries." She is also making needed contacts to convey care of the Taft memorial and surrounding land to the Mendon Historical Society.

For Pat's lasting interest in directing the Taft Family Association, for her unpaid hours of computer work with GEDCOM, for editing first-class issues of the Newsletter, and for guiding us through the sad recognition that the organization must close, I offer Pat gratitude on behalf of all of us. With accolades and good wishes, *Sally Gagné*

In Memoriam

Patricia (Libbey) Davis

Our deepest condolences to our long-standing board member, Charles Davis, on the passing of his wife and partner.

On 25 Oct 2020, Patricia 'Pat' Libbey Davis passed away peacefully at home at the age of 94. She leaves her husband Charles, son Charles Davis, daughters Laura Verdibello, Margaret Davis and Glenna Davis, and grandchildren: Julia, Erik, Spencer, Christopher and Alec. Pat was born April 7, 1926 in Bethesda, MD, to Joseph Dodge and Emma (Vandercook) Libbey. Growing up in Bethesda, MD, Staten Island, NY and Cali, Colombia, she developed a love of travel that she carried into her later years, visiting all the continents, most of the US and all of the provinces of Canada. After graduating from the University of Maryland, she married Charles. They were married for 64 years and raised their family in Concord. Her love of children transferred over to her teaching and tutoring career. Over the years, she worked at the Carroll school, The Fenn School and Middlesex School. Patricia had a great appreciation of music and art. Her hands were rarely still and she enjoyed painting, knitting and quilting. She also loved to sing and in her younger years was a member of the Concord Chorus and West Concord Union Church choir. She was a puzzle, trivia and crossword enthusiast as well as an avid gardener. She and Charles were often found attending to one of their favorite hobbies: their apple orchard. When she was 85, her children insisted that she stop picking apples from a ladder after she fell, breaking her arm. She worked as an advocate for Domestic Violence Victims Advocacy Program, was a past president and active member of the West Concord Womans Club and an active member and president of the John Libby Family Association where she supervised the publication of the third volume of the Libby family history.

(Source: The Concord Journal 2-12 Nov 2020

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Executive Committee: Charles F. Davis Jr., Sally Gagne

Please stay healthy and safe and enjoy your loved ones and the blessings of this world.